

Arsenal

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Traumatic experience inspires the human drive for expression. Survivors carry the memory of trauma with them throughout their lives while they struggle to comprehend its impact. They maintain a fragile stability as their capacity to move forward is challenged and their perception of the world around them is altered. The force of memory compels those who have survived a traumatic event to build a defensive arsenal and to search for and to convey an understanding of their experience. My minimalist abstract ceramic sculpture examines the incidence of trauma and explores the transference of concepts and emotions associated with its effects.

The Art of Survival

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A concentration on what encompasses the concept of surviving trauma drives my creative process. I find formal inspiration by applying analogous relationships to the ways we endure adversity and investigating the properties of objects we utilize for preservation. I derive shape from these significant concepts or objects by breaking down their elements and reassembling them into sculptural objects constructed of clay. I place emphases on combining, altering, simplifying or disorienting shape while exploring new directions in stationary form.

As there is a process to every form of artistic expression, there is a process to surviving a traumatic experience; a process we often refer to in contemporary culture as a form of art. I attempt to merge a process of art with that of survival by combining fragments of experience with aspects of form to build structures as imagined through the view of a survivor. There is certainly an art to human survival. It includes a force of thoughts, feelings, instincts and strategies that make up the means that allow us to endure. These are condensed and manifested in the pieces of my thesis exhibition, *Arsenal*.

Safe Haven

The ceramic sculpture titled *Haven* is the principal sculpture of the work included in the *Arsenal* exhibition. It is attended by two companion pieces that together form a contingent of work representative of the theme of survival. *Haven*'s companion pieces serve as supporting structures while *Haven* specifically references one of the most significant aspects of surviving a traumatic event; the necessity of finding a protected place in the midst of a dangerous environment.

Adaptations of the concept of a sailing vessel inspired the form of *Haven* and its companion sculptures. A vessel moving through rough waters and head on winds equates with that of a victim attempting to navigate through a difficult circumstance. *Haven* more specifically references the staysail of a ship as a metaphorical refuge in that the sail exterior takes on the heaviest force of wind as it cuts through the atmosphere while the interior atmosphere remains fairly consistent or stable. This analogy connects with the onslaught of challenges survivors face as they attempt to move forward and find a place of peace within themselves and their environment.

The front portion of the sculpture is shaped similar to the sail exterior. It takes the form of an extended hemisphere, leaning or bowing slightly away from the front toward the top. The sides and back of the sculpture assume an undulating shape as if adjusting to changing winds or repelling evasive backwinds that may alter or disturb the interior and destroy its structure. There is a small elevation symbolic of a shelter or a passageway leading to the safety of the interior space at the bottom of the back of the sculpture. Its diminutive size in comparison to the larger structure reflects the greater effort necessary to provide a smaller place of refuge.

In its entirety, *Haven* imagines the shape or form that a place of safety may assume for a survivor. Although it is inspired by sailing vessels associated with my European and African immigrant heritage and the connection to contradictory concepts of freedom versus enslavement, comfort versus suffering or safety versus danger, the impulse to escape to a protected place is the core meaning behind this piece. Finding a sanctuary, both emotional and physical, is difficult and necessary and once found often unstable. The fragile state of being, paired with the strength survivors strive to possess, is also represented by an analogical relationship with an object as seemingly delicate as a fabric sail that can maintain its integrity against the striking force of wind.



Haven, Glazed Ceramic, 24" x 8" x 7", 2018

The Relevance of Clay Media

A material possesses the capacity to express and inform artistic content. I sculpt with clay because of its interactive and versatile properties. It is a soft material that moves and responds to touch as if it possesses the capacity to record every action forced upon it. My motivations merge with my interactions with clay as I strive to apply my ideas and feelings and capture what is intangible into a corporeal form. A meditative and intuitive process exists in developing the contour and surface in the formation of clay objects. Its versatility allows for both additive and subtractive methods of construction and the creation of inspiring possibilities for sculptural form.

Clay is remarkable in its relation to the theme of survival as well. Its flexibility echoes the resourcefulness required to move beyond a traumatic event. Conversely, its sculptural potential has made it one of the most ancient and enduring artistic materials. Its history extends to the earliest form of human artistic expression. Objects containing clay fired to ceramic thousands of years in the past survive to this day. One such object is the *Figure of Dolní Věstonice*, a small ceramic feminine figurine made of local loess discovered at the Paleolithic village of Dolní Věstonice in Moravia, Czech Republic. This and other small animal figures found at the village, which was occupied between 28,000 to 24,000 BCE, are the oldest known ceramic objects in the world (Vandiver 1002-1008). Despite their longevity, ceramic objects such as those discovered at Dolní Věstonice possess a level of fragility that time and environment impose; fragility that may ultimately lead to their destruction. It is the dichotomy of vulnerability and strength associated with clay and ceramic materials that relate to a sense of resolution and permanence I hope to instill in my work.

The Aesthetics of Motivation

The concept of survival is significant to me personally and aesthetically. My own experiences with trauma inspire a desire to connect my observations and emotions with the aesthetic elements of my work. Specifically, my experience as a victim of familial childhood sexual abuse has impacted most of my life and potentiates my struggle to persevere. As well, it intensifies my awareness of the traumas faced by others and motivates me to investigate how we carry on in dangerous environments or situations and how we cope with the aftermath. The effects of trauma are a shared human experience that often isolates us from one another. However, pieces of our experiences can be expressed through writing, music and forms of visual art. The life altering trauma I have experienced motivates its association with my artwork.

My artistic influences begin with artists of the modernist era. The most prominent of these is Ruth Duckworth, an innovative ceramic sculptor of the twentieth century. An artist who fled Nazi Germany for England at the beginning of WWII, eventually settling in the United States; Duckworth was familiar with surviving a life-threatening event. Her ceramic work is deeply entrenched in the European modernist aesthetic that developed a generation before her time (Lauria 33). The minimal abstract design incorporated into her work is inspirational. The concept of abstraction and the idea of creating distinctive form equates with that of hope and new beginnings and the simplicity and soft surfaces of many of her sculptures provides a sense of visual tranquility and essential strength. I strive to emulate these aspects of her work.

With an aesthetic focus on producing minimalist abstract work, I am influenced by more contemporary artists who have sustained the defining characteristics of the modernist

aesthetic in their work. Artist Eva Hesse moved forward with changing the conception of minimalism in an era defined as postminimalism in the later twentieth century. She retained a dedication to minimalist abstraction and the production of original art while exploring new materials and instilling the suggestion of personal content. Her sculpture contains “echoes of the Holocaust” that recalls fleeing Nazi occupation with her parents as a child and appears “soft, tactile and fragile, developing into a formal language with which to express subjective experiences inflected by a female psyche and bodily experience” (Carson 59). Unlike Duckworth, who approached the design and execution of her work intuitively, Hesse saw her sculpture as a weapon with which to prove herself (Pincus-Witten 44). She imbued her work with a dynamic individuality inspiring the idea that minimal abstraction can be a vehicle for expression.

Theoretical Foundations

The theme and characteristics of my work relate to concepts of Minimalist Abstraction, Phenomenology and Affect theory. Artistic movements categorized within a Modernist frame of reference have profound connections to the formal qualities of the sculptural objects I create. Of these, the hallmarks of abstraction and the tenets of minimalism are avenues to discover combinations of shape, surface and color in the assemblage of distinctive form that imbues a sensibility involving the conceptual or emotional aspects of survival. My focus is on the shape and formal qualities that a sculptural object assumes in relation to this sensibility.

Abstract works of art possess a level of separation from the visual imagery of our world. They function to convey the intangible; such as ideas, feelings or spiritual experience.

This practice became a prevalent form of artistic expression during the Modernist era of the twentieth century and has carried forward to our present time. I utilize abstraction and associate it with the idea of discovery and new beginning in form that I search for. Lucy Lippard offers an extended view of abstraction in the time following Modernism when she identifies “eccentric abstraction” as an approach for artists to develop works that open “up new areas of materials, shape, color and sensuous experience.” Her analyses of forms involve descriptors such as “idiosyncratic” regarding the work of Eva Hesse or “alogical” concerning the work of Frank Lincoln Viner, lending to the concept of the not yet known in abstraction (99-104). For me, abstraction is also a method of restructuring; an organization and assemblage of form derived from a disordered or confusing traumatic experience. My process in the development of form relates to this idea. Laurie Fendrich speaks about this conviction and about abstraction as being “about ideas” and “the complex struggle between order and chaos” (16).

The attributes of minimalism within my work include an attention to simplicity, a focus on shape and the extended evasion of specific visual imagery. These reductive elements provide a means to instill substance and order as they offer a sense of directness, organization and tranquility. Robert Pincus-Witten, in his 1971 book *Postminimalism*, does not describe minimalism, with its reduction of expressive elements, during the end of the Modernist era in these terms. He defines this practice as “Formalism...at its crudest.” He associates it with formalist abstraction and an extreme concern with formal elements that are devoid of content or character, as defined by critics such as Michael Fried as well as the artists who produced minimal work during this time (13-14). The idea that formalism equates with the absence of content or meaning, as it existed in the minimalist movement, is an

isolated view. Art historians Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl laid the foundation for the formal analyses of works of art in the twentieth century prior to the prevalence of minimalism with the theory that the form an artwork assumes is associated with the conceptual nature of its time. Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk explain that Wölfflin and Riegl understood the formal elements of a work of art offered “unmediated sensory access to past world views” and the analyses of these a method to “unlock the concepts belonging to different cultures” (66-67). Regardless of minimalism’s extreme depth of formal emphasis, the ability to discover content in form equates with the idea that form embodies content. Artist and author Ben Shahn affirms this when he states that form itself is ‘inseparable’ from content or ideas (53).

The artistic practice of utilizing minimal formal elements or reductive practices in the expression of content continues in contemporary art practice. Pincus-Witten established the term “Postminimalism”, defining this as an era of artistic practice that follows the movement of minimalism with the “essential reductive and analytical character aspects of Minimalism while including aspects that are less immediately so” (15). Lynn Zelevansky explains that postminimalism used minimalism in concert with a “freer hand” by allowing “artists to bring the more overtly personal back into their work through touch, expressionism and idiosyncrasy” (9). I rely on the simple elements of form specifically to provide emphasis or impression of fortitude. Minimal elements also offer a sense of harmony that I value personally and aesthetically. They make it possible for me to express the content and feelings associated with my work, in my work.

In the process of developing formal qualities that explore aspects of survival, I look to objects and analogies that relate to the many impressions involved with the concepts and

emotions concerned with this theme. I reference physical ways that humans use to protect themselves and ultimately survive through material objects. Tools, weaponry, armor or shields have been utilized throughout human history and I draw inspiration from them to adapt to sculptural form. They all represent security, protection from harm and the strength of a survivor. Beyond these, I reference vessels that we use for shelter, escape or as a means of defense; vessels such as ships or aircraft, their structure and components. Other forms of inspiration come from the wave patterns these vessels create as they navigate through bodies of water or move through the atmosphere. I build a visual reserve of these to draw upon for design to discover connections between shapes and colors and the possibilities they possess for sculptural expression. They are directly associated with my personal observations and feelings about what is involved with the experience of survival.

Any object that humans make and utilize possesses purpose and therefore meaning. Appropriating the formal properties or differing aspects of the objects associated with the theme of surviving trauma within a sculptural form in turn integrates their significance. Furthermore, combining and abstracting them allows me to reimagine them in unique configurations and explore the directions that sculptural form can take within space. Paul Crowther reinforces the idea that objects possess meaning and explains our awareness of their import in his book about Phenomenology in the visual arts.

It should be emphasized that our ways of recognizing objects of perception is also dependent on psychological and emotional relationships to them. We do not merely register things and states of affairs, we *characterize* them in terms of whether they and their properties are reassuring to us or are in some ways threatening. Indeed, the positions into which we put ourselves, and thence the things we find there, emerge through a soliciting or avoidance, on the basis of our interests and our history in relation to the things in question (107).

I determine the objects and analogies necessary to bring the work together in relation to how

they support a specific form of expression. Many of the sculptural objects that result from their reference often provide reassurance as they equate with a symbolic defensive arsenal associated with the complex journey of survival.

Art works motivated from the experience of trauma are affective in nature. Theoretically, they are representational and possess the potential to invoke an impression or inspire inquiry. In *Empathic Vision*, Jill Bennett states that such works are “best understood as *transactive*,” where artists attempt through process to find a language in form. Characteristic forms of art that result not only encompass suffering, they demonstrate a private language, a process of moving out of the realm of traumatic memory into a dynamic encounter with a structure of representation. As Gilles Deleuze describes it, it is a process of putting “an outside and an inside into contact” (Bennett 31).

Although works that reference trauma may affect us, they may not necessarily communicate the secret of a personal experience to a viewer. Bennett explains that “we cannot automatically presuppose that imagery associated with traumatic memory will take a particular form” (31). She reinforces the idea that artworks related to trauma are fluid or diverse. In *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*, Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel address why. They describe the dilemma of the contemporary artist attempting to represent a traumatic experience as they examine women artists whose work involves the subject of sexual violence. They explain, “women artists face an uphill climb in their efforts to represent the grim reality of sexual violence because of the weird (and wildly profitable) fusing of violence and glamour in the mass media” (119). Robertson and McDaniel reference the difficulty or impossibility of revealing a traumatic experience through human imagery or form. This is because doing so may turn an artwork into a depiction of violence or violation

and an image that effectively recreates a traumatic event without infusing the survivor's perspective. Therefore, many works of art related to trauma may assume forms exclusive of figuration. Like *Haven*, my work explores specific factors associated with the effects of a traumatic experience through the unconventional form of minimal abstraction.

As artists attempt to transfer the experience of trauma, they will often focus on one or more aspects of it, but rarely all of what that experience involves. Bennett again refers to Deleuze and the *encountered sign* from his work *Proust and Signs*, which describes the “sign” that is felt rather than recognized or perceived through cognition. This sense or feeling creates a catalyst for critical inquiry or thought (Bennett 7). In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze himself describes it as an impression that forces us to observe, deliberate and decipher; it is “the object of an encounter that guarantees the necessity of what it leads us to interpret” (95-98).

Bennett and Deleuze describe my attempt to express a view and experience through transference and how my concern is to convey a sense or nuance of concepts regarding the survival of trauma. My sculptures may only bring about an affectual response in a viewer and this response may not necessarily correspond with my ideas or emotions. Regardless of how the work is received, it becomes a representation of survival and may generate a dialogue for interpretation and discovery regarding a confusing and devastating experience.

Arsenal

An arsenal is defined as an assemblage of resources accessible for a specific purpose. Although predominantly a reference for military caches, contemporary culture adapts its use to reference reserves of other types. *Arsenal* is a reference to both the artwork contained

within this exhibition as well as to the reserve of concepts or emotions involved with the theme of surviving a traumatic experience. It includes minimalist abstract ceramic sculptures; three stationary sculptures titled *Haven*, *Echelon I* and *Echelon II* and three wall sculptures titled *Reverb*, *Perplex I* and *Perplex II*. Both the free-standing sculptures and the wall pieces were created as a group and bear a relationship to one another. They are presented together to establish an environment for the contemplation of their origin and expressive influence.



Echelon I (side view) and *Echelon II* (rear view), Glazed Ceramic, 21” x 7” x 8”, 2018

Echelon I and *Echelon II* attend *Haven* as companion structures conceived as guardians or objects of momentum and mirror one another in form and placement. The front of each *Echelon* sculpture has a sharp blade form like the blade of a weapon or tool, or the

shape of the bow of a ship designed to cut through and deflect interference or obstacles. The blade form defers to a vertical waveform on one side and undulating waveforms on the opposing side that signify the concept of movement of the sculptures through space. Their contours echo how a shape can transform from the toll that adaptations of guarded diversion and impulsion assume on a supporting structure. The concept of support these two sculptures provide is central to a survivor's sustained existence and courage to move forward.

The movement of vessels and the similar wave patterns they create inspire the wave reference in the work. The Kelvin wave patterns resulting from marine vessels moving through the resistance of a body of water and the supersonic shock waves that aircraft create as they break through the atmospheric barrier at the speed of sound are similar. These waves or folds epitomize ideas of overcoming obstacles, liberation, surges of change or alternating emotion. Together with the incorporation of these patterns, the three stationary forms in *Arsenal* are somewhat disoriented and asymmetrical, which equates with the state of confusion involved with traumatic experience. Incorporating waveforms and disproportion in *Haven* and the *Echelon* forms is visually poignant as well as thematically symbolic as they serve to express the need for protection or support and convey the perplexity involved with the aftermath of traumatic event. Together, the sculptures combine forces to provide a sense of these perceptions.

Each of the three hollow sculptures was formed using stoneware clay and hand built using the coil method of construction, a process that creates a sense of guided influence on material and structure. Each coil was hand compressed prior to attachment. This compression and attachment technique creates a soft uneven surface, which is essentially a record of every alteration or touch to the clay that remains slightly detectable after the final firing of the

forms. As they were built, the irregular surfaces were scraped and leveled with forming tools to achieve a softer, smoother texture. Many of these tools resemble objects I reference for form and their use in the surface refining process provides a sense of personal control. I realize an ability to exert some form of influence through the processes involved in the working of the clay and the making of the work.

Reverb, *Perplex I* and *Perplex II* are square segment wall sculptures that complement and establish a framework for *Haven*, *Echelon I* and *Echelon II*. They are each comprised of simple square components that provide a perception of material stability (Shepherd 335 & 341). Each wall piece in turn references a table or grid format that functions to present a strong sense of purpose.

Rosalind Krauss reinforces the idea of the grid as a decisive artistic format in her assertion that it “declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic” (3). The square components, together with their reductive grid-like formations, follow her assertion as they establish the conception of a well-ordered and determined state that has experienced changes of circumstance. Each segment within each sculpture possesses a wave alteration arising from its base that in turn, symbolizes ideas or emotions associated with the adaptations or challenges associated with trauma. Through placement and content, they address trauma’s complex and confusing nature.

Reverb is a five-segment central wall piece that imagines the shock of trauma and its repercussions. The center section is demonstrative of the initial impact of a traumatic event. It has an up swell alteration that corresponds with the first amplification of fear experienced during such an event. The bilateral side sections directly left and right of center represent the emotional states of anger and depression that follow, and the bilateral end sections represent

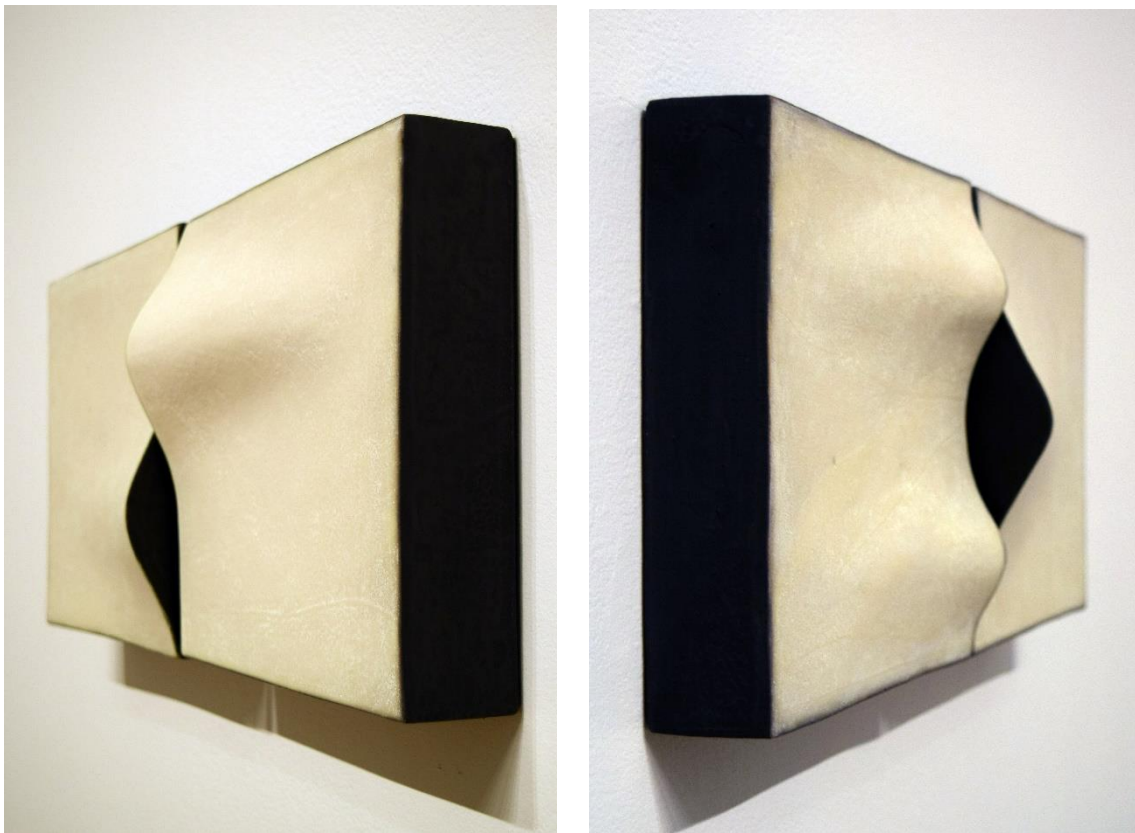
the barrier of confusion that may shift to resolution of what a survivor has experienced. The segments are positioned in relation to one another to create a slight interrupted flow of undulating form that mimics the deviation of traumatic effect and experience. As a unit, this piece is positioned as the focal wall piece for the exhibition and extends directly behind the midpoint of the position of *Haven*.



Reverb, Glazed Ceramic, 9" x 46" x 5", 2018

Perplex I and *Perplex II* are two segment wall sculptures that demonstrate the contradictory concepts and emotions that create confusion for a survivor. The inability to comprehend a traumatic event creates psychological and emotional barriers that may never

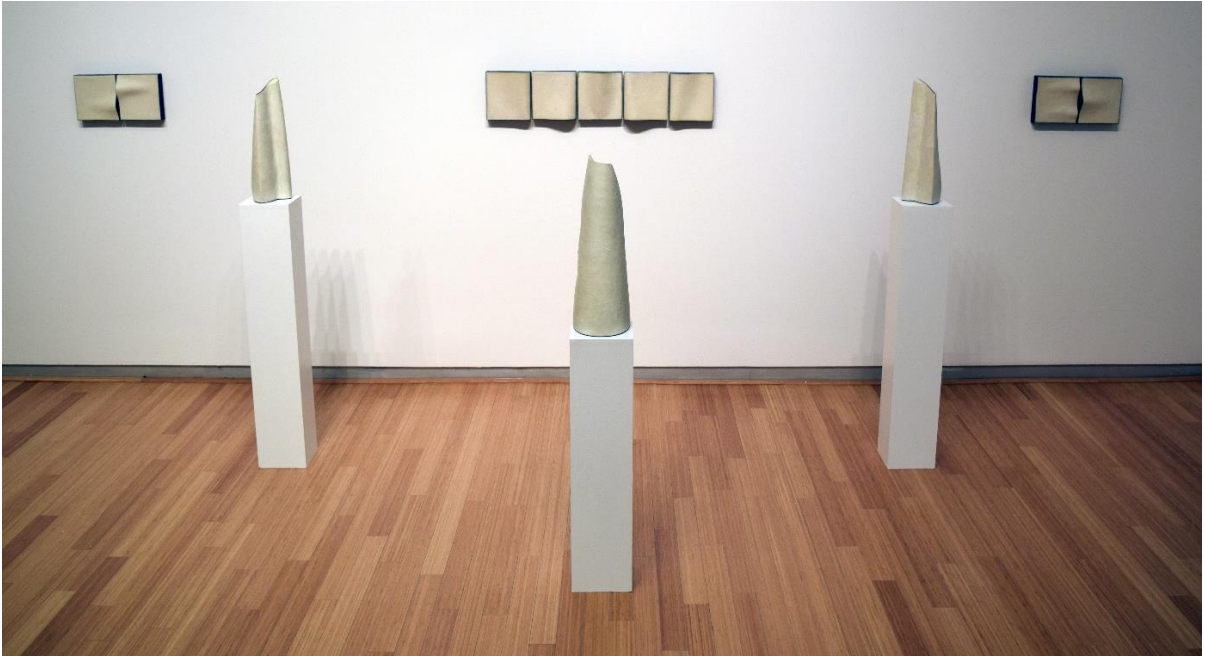
be resolved and at times function as a protective process. As with *Reverb*, the two segments possess wave forms. However, these waveforms symbolize two opposing sides of an idea or the polarization of emotions that face one another in a confrontational fashion. A space or gap exists between the two segments that expresses the difficulty or impossibility of achieving absolute understanding. These two pieces are positioned to the left and right of *Reverb* to provide balance and frame *Echelon I* and *Echelon II*.



Perplex I, 19" x 9" x 4" and *Perplex II*, 19" x 9" x 5", Glazed Ceramic, 2018

Reverb, *Perplex I* and *Perplex II* were made using the handbuilding techniques of soft and hard slab construction, which are more structured and straightforward methods than the coil building technique. They are simple constructs that possess similar attributes to one

another. Collectively, their shapes manifest aspects of the struggle to move beyond the effects of trauma. They indirectly characterize the chaotic changes of an ordered existence and aspects of the trauma survivor experience.



Arsenal, MFA Exhibition Installation. Herron Main Gallery. 2018.

The group of stationary and wall sculptures are intended as a manifestation or expression of the structure that the idea of survival might assume. The characteristics of this concept carry through the work in the color, shape and texture of each form and its placement in relation to the others. These elements create a sense of visual movement and the potential to evoke an emotive response.

The entirety of the work is glazed with contrasting matte glazes of off white and dark grey to provide contrast and visually associate each piece to another. The matte surfaces absorb the light directed at them creating depth to draw attention and to possibly support an

emotional response. The relatively smooth texture of each piece is intended to highlight the similar and recurring contours of the forms and serves to create a visual flow or stream of sensation. The continuity of color, shape and smooth texture of the surfaces allows the work to present as a united body. Each object exists with the others as they serve in concert; an essential aspect of portraying the greater concept of survival.

Placement of the stationary sculptures also indirectly references the exhibition theme. The concept of tactical formations, found both in nature and in military practice, is a powerful positional reference to survival. Such formations have the potential to convey the idea of protection or defense in a straightforward manner. The group of three are placed in the Vic, V or Chevron formation; a flying formation of migratory birds and a tactical flight formation used by military aircraft and pilots that allows them to visualize, communicate and maneuver most effectively when flying together in any given situation. It also contributes to the effectiveness of their mission and ultimate survival. These important aspects are recreated with *Haven* placed at the head of the V and the *Echelon* sculptures placed in echelon positions; to the left and right behind it. The pedestal heights vary to provide the impression of collective movement, whereas the space between the sculptures becomes part of the formation and an area to experience the sense of purpose the arrangement provides.

In Conclusion

Arsenal is a product of the processes of art and of survival. It involves identifying, altering and combining formal aspects of objects and analogies related to the perceptions of survival while exploring sculptural form. The visual characteristics of the sculptures result from imagining the many elements that encompass this theme. They embody many artistic

influences and aspects that relate to the human need for protection and meaning in response to traumatic events. Through the progression of their development, I have discovered the quiet and austere nature of their form and how they imbue the fundamental emotions and principles associated with the life altering and widespread effects of trauma. Being a survivor or knowing what it is to survive is not exclusive to any one person or group; this body of work symbolizes the idea that surviving is a perpetual and universal struggle and a historically collective human experience.

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